

THE SHOOTING ON THE MOEHLSTRASSE

Is It Nazi Anti-Semitism All Over Again?

NORBERT MUHLEN

IN AUGUST the world press excitedly reported that the Moehlstrasse in Munich had been the scene of the "worst anti-Semitic outbursts since Hitler." Most dispatches gave the impression that a Munich newspaper had published an anti-Semitic item, and that Jewish DP's who assembled to protest against it were run down and shot at by the Munich police. Here was the avenue leading to a new Auschwitz! This was alarming news indeed. As it happened, I was close at hand before, during, and after the events on the Moehlstrasse. What actually occurred was rather different from and considerably more complicated than what the correspondents reported.

To get at the real story, we must go back a bit. In the essentially rural city of Munich, the Moehlstrasse was once a pleasant little street of semi-suburban, well-to-do villas. Only four blocks long and bordering on the Isar river, it recalled in its character and appearance the streets in New York City's Washington Heights and Inwood sections, where college professors, doctors, and manufacturers reside, overlooking the Hudson and seemingly far away from Manhattan. Its new career began after the surrender, when the

international relief organizations for DP's of Jewish and other origins were billeted in requisitioned houses of the Moehlstrasse and its neighborhood. In their thousands, people from the European East and Southeast, swept to Germany by the tides of war, came to these offices in search of immediate help and a more promising future.

The little streets around the offices soon became the meeting place and the market place of the DP's. They stood around in the street, exchanged rumors, gossip, information, made deals of all sorts among themselves, and soon also with the German population. In the black market of the first postwar years, such rare goods as cigarettes, coffee, food of all sorts, could be bought at the Moehlstrasse, as everybody in Munich knew.

Today, the overwhelming majority of the DP's have left the country, most of them for Palestine, some for America or other overseas countries. But a minority remains, still centering around the Moehlstrasse, which has become a strange new settlement, a booming shack-town such as those in the America of the goldrush years.

The Moehlstrasse and the four little streets leading to it are now shopping streets where you can buy almost everything. But the "stores" are a little different from the usual run of shops. Some of them consist only of a table crudely set up on the street, with some merchandise spread out on it and the rest hidden in a cheap suitcase over which the owner stands guard. The next stage of economic progress is marked by an umbrella protecting the goods and the salesman, perhaps with a cart replacing the more primitive table. The next shop may have a primitive booth around the table, giving the first hint of a real store. Then a display window is

THERE is a widespread and certainly understandable apprehension at the possibility of a resurgence of Nazi anti-Semitism in Germany. And when the recent report of a clash between Jewish DP's and German police in Munich made the front pages of the world's press, these fears were vigorously stimulated. NORBERT MUHLEN, who was in Munich during this incident, here supplies a first-hand report that throws a new light on the "battle of the Moehlstrasse." Mr. Muhlen is the author of *Schacht: Hitler's Magician* (1939) and *Starving Them to Death* (1939). His most recent contribution to COMMENTARY was "Comic Books and Other Horrors" in the January 1949 issue.

added, and often a small back-room is finally built and the raw wooden structure improved into a small concrete hut. In the Moehlstrasse, one can find all these types standing side by side, in free competition and unsystematic mixture, demonstrating like a living museum the development of retailing from trading posts to modern stores.

WITH the disappearance, since the currency reform, of shortages of consumer goods on the German market, the Moehlstrasse no longer specializes in luxury items unobtainable elsewhere, but in cut-rate prices on a large variety of goods, which attract shoppers from all over Munich, especially the poor. Food stores dominate, offering everything from Argentinian corned beef to French liqueurs; in several windows I saw a display of tins of American cocoa with the label "A Gift from the American Jews," and the name of a well-known American relief organization. There are also many stores selling silverware, clothing, shoes, and furs. From early morning to late evening trading goes on between men who speak Yiddish, Polish, Ukrainian, and Latvian, and their customers who answer in the Bavarian dialect. Every few steps in the Moehlstrasse neighborhood, one runs into a little group of men who in a more secretive manner than that of the shopkeepers are trading bills and banknotes of all countries.

The newsstands at the corners display, besides Hungarian, Russian, and Polish refugee papers, the three weekly Yiddish papers which are published in Munich, and which reflect the political parties of Palestine: there is a Social Democratic, a Mapam, and a General Zionist publication, all written, printed, and sold in Munich.

I talked with several shopkeepers and traders from the Moehlstrasse a few days before it made the headlines of the world press. Most of them did not want to leave Germany because they saw better business opportunities here than anywhere else in the world. A few of them had already done very well, and hoped to do still better. A few others wanted to save money so they could emigrate

overseas with sufficient capital. There was a young Jew from Poland who had survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, had studied medicine after the war in Holland, had an immigration visa to the United States, and planned to go there as soon as he had earned the ten thousand dollars which, his relatives had written to him, one needs to get started as a doctor in America. There was an elderly man from Latvia who sold silver candlesticks and cigarettes; he had heard that people were starving in the States, that business was bad in Palestine, and he was quite happy here in the Moehlstrasse for the time being. Most of the Moehlstrasse men, uprooted from their former homes, able to survive only by highly developed toughness, and without family and community ties, had the understandable view that they had a moral right to get the best out of life, and especially out of Germany. Except for the exchange of goods and money, there was hardly any contact between them and the German population. They distrusted each other, but found each other economically useful. The Munich people disliked the Jews as probably every rural society dislikes a group of foreigners, whether they be Swedish farmers coming to a New England town or Prussian refugees from Soviet persecutions coming to Bavaria.

Withal, there was no actual hostility between the two groups. This was confirmed to me by Munich police officials a few days before the Moehlstrasse riot. Six policemen were all that was needed to patrol this neighborhood, while a larger number had to be sent to other, tougher districts of the city. The director of the Munich police laughed when I asked whether he expected any trouble in the Moehlstrasse.

Now for the more immediate background of the August events. In the last days of July 1949, John J. McCloy, the newly-appointed United States High Commissioner in Germany, met in Heidelberg with American and German leaders in charge of Jewish problems in the occupied areas. In his speech McCloy asserted that the gauge

of the democratic re-education of Germany would be the development of a new attitude on the part of the Germans toward the Jews. Taking up this point, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, a large morning newspaper published in Munich and one of the first to have been licensed by American Military Government, published a long editorial stressing Mr. McCloy's statement, elaborating on it from the German view, and strongly condemning any form of social or subconscious anti-Semitism which its readers might consider "legitimate." The editorial was written and signed by Mr. E. W. Sueskind, one of the editors of the newspaper and a writer with a long-established literary reputation.

One week later, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* printed in its Letters-to-the-Editor column four letters referring to the editorial; three strongly approved of its message, while a fourth objected to it in vitriolic language. It told the Jews to "go to America, but there they don't have any use for you, they too are fed up with these blood-suckers. I'm employed by the American occupation authorities, and some of them have already said to me that they forgive us everything but that we haven't gassed all of the Jews, who are now enjoying themselves in America. . . ." The letter went on explaining that "we"—those who think about the Jews like the writer of the letter—"are a very small circle. . . . Please publish my letter if you're really a 'democrat.'"

Mr. Sueskind, who at the time was himself in charge of the letters column, published the letter, thinking of it as an educational document. He only shortened it by crossing out the introduction in which the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* was asked to "disappear from Europe since you scoundrels and gangsters are only parasites," and in which he himself, as the writer of the original editorial, was told: "You too are a Jew. Get out of Europe, for in twenty years it'll be too late for you." In short, Mr. Sueskind, by publishing the letter in which he and his newspaper were so viciously attacked, tried to act as our American press does, opening its columns to the free expression of opinion. However, he

did not note that the signature under the letter, "Adolf Bleibtreu, Muenchen 22, Palestinastrasse 33," was a transparent pseudonym; in translation it means "Adolf, Remain Faithful, Palestine Street," and "33" was the year in which Hitler came to power. He did not check the address of the signer, which later turned out to be fake, nor did he think of adding a preface or reply to the letter. In short, he acted like a very democratic, though perhaps sloppy and incompetent, editor. As it happened, the two executive editors of the paper who might have handled the matter more sensibly were abroad.

The news of the publication of the letter soon reached the Moehlstrasse, where German newspapers are not usually read. A crowd of two to three hundred offended Jews gathered immediately, and decided to march on the offices of the "Nazi paper" and smash or burn them. Their belief was that it was the editorial opinion of the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* rather than that of a letter to the editor that "all the Jews should be gassed." (Some of them still think so.)

American Military Government in Germany has a ruling that all public meetings and demonstrations have to be licensed by it. Here was undoubtedly a case of a spontaneous, unlicensed demonstration. Spokesmen of the Jewish Committee which represents the DP's tried to talk the demonstrators out of their undertaking, but to no avail. The six Munich policemen on duty also tried to stop the demonstration, but were swept away by the very excited crowd.

WHEN this crowd had moved on a few blocks to the Statue of the Angel of Peace, which stands at the point where the Moehlstrasse district leads to the main part of the city, it had grown to more than seven hundred and fifty in number. Here Munich city police tried again to stop them, again in vain. At this moment, a detachment of Munich city mounted policemen arrived and galloped toward the advancing mass. They were greeted by a volley of stones taken from the war ruins which surround the Angel of Peace.

Precisely what happened in the next decisive minutes cannot be established with absolute reliability. It is certain that at least one policeman, perhaps more, drew his gun and fired into the crowd. It is also certain that the police had not received permission or orders from the superior officers in charge to use their guns. The policeman declared later that he was surrounded by a threatening crowd trying to disarm him and beat him up, and that he acted in self-defense. On the other hand, the Jews wounded by his shots were wounded from behind, which at least shows that they were not the attackers, unless the policeman shot blindly into the crowd. A short battle followed, fought with clubs by police, with stones and sticks by the Jews. Only a very few German civilians were seen taking part in the fight on the side of the police; even fewer Germans participated in the fight on the Jewish side, one of them a Bavarian woman whose son had been executed by the Nazis as a political enemy—she happened to be shopping in the Moehlstrasse when the excitement began.

In the next thirty minutes, two companies of Military Police of the United States Army were rushed to the scene and drew a cordon between the Jews and the Munich police; American officers, among them a Jewish army chaplain, and an executive of a Jewish relief organization, spoke to the Jews from loudspeakers mounted on trucks and asked them to disperse. When quiet was finally restored, at least six Jews had been hurt by shots, and six more Jews beaten up; the police officers said that twenty-six men of their force were wounded. There were no deaths. The investigation which ensued and in which the Bavarian Chief Rabbi, the leaders of the Jewish Community of Bavaria, and the Jewish political representative in the government participated, led to the finding that "no anti-Semitic tendencies had played a part in the Munich police force." The German press, which, of course, does not necessarily reflect German public opinion, protested without exception against the mistake of publishing a letter which was so likely to lead to misunderstanding, defended the Jewish demon-

strators, and admonished their readers and countrymen to purge themselves of anti-Semitic feelings if they still had any.

As I write this, life in the Moehlstrasse goes on as usual. The cops on duty, the Bavarian shoppers, and the displaced shopkeepers have taken up their old rounds. A new Jewish coffee-house has been opened, a few new stores are being built around the old sales tables, and cigarettes are still sold fifty pfennigs cheaper than in the city shops, which means more to a Munich smoker than any editorials in his favorite morning newspaper.

WHAT really happened in the Moehlstrasse seems to have been one of those sudden outbursts of mass hysteria that explode once in a while when there is a state of underground tension between what social psychologists call an "in-group" majority and an "out-group" minority. Ethnically, socially, economically, in language and social status, the displaced Jews of the Moehlstrasse undoubtedly form a typical out-group. The mere mention of the word "gassing," and of Nazi atrocities, is likely to startle the Jews into a precipitate reaction; foreigners in a country which they fear and which distrusts them, they can hardly be expected to react rationally to such incitement.

If the attitude of the Germans to these Jews can be called anti-Semitic, it must be added that this present anti-Semitism bears little resemblance, on the whole, to the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, nor does it seem to be, as is so often claimed, a recrudescence of it. It is anti-Semitism of a newer—and yet older—breed.

Before Hitler, there were approximately five hundred thousand Jews in Germany; almost ninety per cent of them had been born there, and the families of many had lived in Germany for one or more centuries. Today there are fifty thousand Jews living in Germany; of these, twenty thousand are German Jews, while the remaining thirty thousand are foreigners, the residue of the DP's, approximately ten thousand of whom live in the Moehlstrasse district. The German his-

torian Mommsen once referred to the Jews as "another German tribe"; today they are, admittedly and undoubtedly, a very foreign tribe in the midst of the Germans.

When I discussed the Jewish question with Germans in Bavaria and Franconia, I noted on several occasions the odd comment: "What a mess the Fuehrer made—he hounded away our good Jews, and now we have instead the bad Jews." One elderly woman in Frankfurt, after telling me how she had hidden her Jewish neighbors for a year until she was denounced and brought to a concentration camp, advised me with friendly concern that I should not walk alone late at night on the Bahnhofstrasse, the Moehlstrasse of Frankfurt, since "the Jews" there were dangerous people who attacked strangers and robbed them. A pastry-baker in Fuerth, who had been sent to jail because he brought his fresh pastry as a gift every day to the house in which the old Jews of Fuerth were kept prisoners by the Nazis, explained to me that it was a *selbstverstaendlich* act for him to do so; but a little later he had hard words for the Jews in a nearby displaced persons camp. But in Schwaebisch-Gmuend, significantly, where there had been a DP camp with Polish Jews who had later been succeeded by non-Jewish Poles, a delegation of the mayor and the citizens of the town asked the authorities whether they could not have back the former inmates, the Polish Jews, rather than the newcomers; the former were still less foreign, and therefore less dreaded, than the latter!

WHAT seems to have happened is that "Jewish" has become synonymous with "foreign" in the new German imagery. Conversely, the twenty thousand native German Jews still living in Germany—most of them people who somehow managed to survive the Third Reich with the help of their non-Jewish friends or relatives, while a few others are re-immigrants—have more or less ceased to be considered as Jews by the Germans. Two candidates of purely Jewish origins—in Hamburg and in Hanau—were elected as delegates to the new Bundes-Parliament in

Bonn this August; in the election campaign, tough and vicious though it was, no anti-Semitic arguments were used against them. The Secretary of Justice in a North-German British-occupied *Land*, the Secretary of Finance in the biggest city of Western Germany, the president of the Bar Association in Northern Bavaria—all are of Jewish descent and have never been attacked on racial or religious grounds. A high official in the West Berlin police, who returned to her job after surviving a Nazi concentration camp and whose Jewish descent is generally known, told me that occasionally policemen report to her on raids against "the Jews," by which they mean the blackmarket centers of Jewish DP's, without realizing that they are talking to a "Jew."

True, there are some traces, often bizarre, of anti-Semitic Nazi doctrine still to be spotted in the minds of people who often consider themselves anti-Nazis. Talking in trains, in inns, and in coffee-houses with people who took me for another German, I was told quite a few times: "We lost the war in November 1938 when Hitler burned the Jewish synagogues. That brought upon us the revenge of World Jewry." Oddly, this was said without any hate, and even with an appreciation of the right of "World Jewry" to "retaliate." Many, when they saw from my reaction that I disagreed with them, thought it was their criticism of the orders of the Fuehrer to which I objected, took me for a Nazi, and gave me quite a lecture. A German driver in Berlin, to whom I made a remark on the ruins of the Kurfuerstendamm before our eyes, answered: "Yes, that's where the Jews lived before the war. They specially instructed the American bombers to bomb their former houses first." When I said that I thought things were different, he replied excitedly: "You don't know how furious the Jews were against Hitler—perhaps you don't even know what Hitler did to them."

IN DECEMBER 1939, a few months after the outbreak of the war, the German Catholic philosopher Theodor Haecker noted in his secret diary, published posthumously after

the war: "One may assume that the Germans, consciously or subconsciously, will do everything to forget as quickly as possible about what is being said, written, and done today in Germany. Memories of guilt are lasting, therefore they are painful. Man gets rid of them whenever he can. But God has still to decide whether he can."

What one lonesome German secretly scribbled down at night in his diary may explain why ten years later, when I mentioned the six million Jewish dead, I almost invariably got evasive answers from well-meaning average people, such as: "I still can hardly believe that there were men in Germany able to do *such* things." *Such* things are rarely mentioned in Germany today, except by small circles of political or religious leaders; ignorance and disbelief of *such* things appear as the defense mechanism of the "little" man who does not feel himself responsible for the deeds of his government, about which he yet feels helpless and guilty. It might well be that the next generation which has no cause to feel personally responsible about such things of the past may develop a healthier attitude.

As far as can be observed today, the "Jewish question," and the *Weltanschauung* of anti-Semitism, find no room in the minds and the interests of the very young generation—simply because they seem too far removed from the reality of their lives. The experiences of their lifetime—the war and the bombings, the surrender and the breakdown of the order they took for granted, the hunger of the postwar years—were all too traumatic to leave any room for a question which seems as academic and antiquated to them as the problem of the Jews. Whenever I hinted at the problem in many talks with

students, schoolchildren, young workers in many parts of Germany, I got a reply which concerned only the Moehlstrasse (or whatever the local DP center was), the black market, the presence of foreigners. "The Jewish question? Well, don't you think there is something wrong with the way *they* live here?"

IN SUM, although images and ideas taught by the Nazis certainly survive, the main current of anti-Semitism in Germany today does not have the framework of a racist philosophy, the strength of a political doctrine which it had before. It is, more simply, the antagonistic reaction of people against an ethnically and economically foreign group. In this, it revives exactly the European attitude toward the Jews before the Enlightenment, when there was also a very small, very foreign group of "Jews" living among the peoples, doing business with them, selling commodities and exchanging money in more expert ways than their native competitors, but living thoroughly apart from them, in hypertrophied *commercium* and without *con-nubium*.

A long time before Moses Mendelssohn opened the spiritual intermarriage between Germans and Jews, a very long time before Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Boerne appeared as masters of the German language and of German thought, the Jews lived in Germany exactly as the displaced Jews do today, looking back to recent martyrdom, a foreign tribe against whom occasional outbursts and riots flared up.

The Jews in Germany today stand where they stood two hundred years ago, as if there had been no Hitler—or rather because there has been a Hitler.